

Toronto's mayoral campaign: a "dog and pony show" prelude to huge cuts to public and social services

Carl Bronski
23 June 2023

A special by-election for the mayor of Toronto is to be held next Monday, June 26. All the manufactured hype aside, municipal voters are in effect being asked to decide which of the 102 candidates on the ballot they want to cut services and raise taxes in order to balance a one billion dollar shortfall in this year's operating budget. Further red ink is projected for the following years. It has been estimated that the city faces a whopping \$50 billion shortfall over the next decade!

With provincial law forbidding municipalities from running a deficit, the election has quickly devolved into a lying contest amongst the major candidates on what they will cut, how much they will tax and what increasingly improbable government bailouts they will wrangle.

The by-election was called this past February after long-time Conservative mayor John Tory abruptly resigned only months after his latest reelection when reports of an extra-marital affair with a staffer surfaced.

It is expected that the winner of the by-election will garner only about 30 percent of the votes, with a handful of other hopefuls tallying support in the low- to mid-teens. Currently, Olivia Chow, former New Democratic Party federal parliamentarian and widow of the NDP's former leader, Jack Layton, holds a comfortable lead in the polls. Rabid law-and-order candidates Mark Saunders, a former Toronto Police chief and favourite of the right-wing Ontario premier Doug Ford, and Ana Bailão, John Tory's former deputy mayor, appear to be Chow's main challengers.

Already, under John Tory's administration, looming deficits were addressed by draining reserve funds, delaying capital projects, postponing much needed

infrastructure maintenance, cutting transit services while increasing fares, slashing public housing initiatives and reducing library and other social services. Throughout Tory's mayoralty, beginning in 2014, he nonetheless steadfastly resisted opposition attempts to rein in his large annual budget increases to the police services in order to redirect monies to social services.

Candidate promises to be able to successfully lobby the federal and Ontario governments for additional funding to address the budgetary shortfalls are belied by signals from these jurisdictions that such bailouts can no longer be assured. The hard-right Ontario Conservative government of Premier Doug Ford has already passed legislation that reduces the number of initiatives for housing infrastructure development for which cities can seek provincial funding.

After being "cold-shouldered" for several years by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, Toronto city councillors have called on city residents to mount a letter writing campaign to urge Ottawa to make good on a 2021 election promise to provide hundreds of millions of additional COVID relief funds to the city. However, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland's office, busy with funnelling monies to escalate NATO's proxy war against Russia, curtly dismissed the pleas, passing the buck instead to the similarly reluctant Ontario government.

Ford's provincial government prefers that municipal mayors take the lead in slashing services and drastically increasing taxes and fees. Such are the depths of the cuts and tax hikes demanded by the banks and investment houses that the government answers to,

Ford anticipates opposition from whole layers of Toronto's population could pressure city councillors, particularly in hard-hit working class precincts, to water down these attacks.

That is the background to his government's recent passing of unprecedented and grossly anti-democratic legislation that provides mayors in Toronto and Ottawa (and later 26 other municipalities) with the power to override elected city councils. The "Strong Mayors" Act of 2022 grants these mayors the power to unilaterally appoint city managers, reorganize municipal departments, and veto council decisions. A second, "Better Municipal Governance Act" allows a mayor's by-law proposals to be passed with only one-third of council votes. The anti-democratic drive to centralization follows on from Ford's 2018 edict that reduced the number of Toronto city councillors from 47 to 25.

In a last-ditch attempt to prevent an NDP-union-backed Olivia Chow victory, premier Ford and former mayor Tory have boosted, respectively, ex-top cop Saunders and former Tory acolyte Bailão. Supporters of Chow seek to compare their "progressive" coalition with that cobbled together by former Mayor David Miller, who ran the city from 2003 to 2010. Such has been the headlong hurtle to the right by these so-called "left" politicians that Miller's policies of quietly lavishing tax breaks on big business, rationing social services, increasing rates and fees affecting working families and spearheading a 2009 attack on city workers' supposed "overly generous" benefits is now the imprimatur for "progressive" municipal politics.

The truth is the differences between Ford and Tory's mayoral selections and his liberal and social-democratic opponents are at most differences of degree. All are agreed that the working class must pay for Canada's participation in the US-led imperialist war against Russia and for the capitalist crisis more generally through job, wage and service cuts and tax increases.

Toronto's financial crisis occurs as the city's working class sees their living standards further diminishing after years of COVID deprivations, growing housing shortages and a continuing inflationary spiral. Food banks report constant shortages as public pantries fail to keep up with demand. Before the pandemic, the city's Daily Bread Food Bank used to serve 60,000 clients per month.

During the pandemic, usage doubled. This spring it doubled again to over 270,000 client visits per month.

Exorbitant housing rates plague the city's working class. It is estimated that today it takes a minimum annual household salary of \$165,000 (plus the down-payment) just to qualify for a mortgage in the lower end of the home-buying market. The high-interest regime instituted by global central banks to beat back the wage gains of the working class has made buying a home today, already out of reach for most, virtually unattainable for even the highest-earning workers. This has pushed more people into the rental market, allowing landlords to capitalize from the resulting bidding wars. These factors have combined to render more Torontonians homeless. On an average night in December 2022, shelters in the city that already house thousands still turned away more than 100 people.

For tenants, since 2020, rents in Toronto have skyrocketed. By 2021, 290,000 Greater Toronto tenants had shelter costs that were unaffordable (representing 30 percent to 50 percent of household income) or severely unaffordable (representing more than 50 percent of household income). Three-quarters of renter households that earned less than \$60,000 per year spent more than 30 percent of their income on shelter costs—the commonly accepted benchmark for housing affordability.

There is no shortage of resources in Toronto, which is the most unequal city in the nation according to Statistics Canada. All five major Toronto banks and dozens of brokerage firms are headquartered in Toronto. Top bank and investment house executives now earn upwards of \$15 million per year. Awash in cash for the few, the city is home to 17 billionaires by one count, including the country's richest families. With assets including the Thomson-Reuters media conglomerate, the Thomson family, for example, is estimated to be worth more than C\$70 billion.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact